Journalists successfully used secure computing to expose Panama Papers, researchers say

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A team of researchers from Clemson University, Columbia University and the University of Washington has discovered a security success in an unlikely place: the "Panama Papers."

"Success stories in computer security are rare," said Franzi Roesner, assistant professor at the University of Washington and one of the principal investigators on this project. "But we discovered that the journalists involved in the Panama Papers project seem to have achieved their security goals."

The Panama Papers project was a year-long collaborative investigation of leaked documents detailing the uses of offshore funds by clients of the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca. During this project, a large, diverse group of globally distributed journalists collaborated remotely via the internet while achieving their security goals.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning Panama Papers investigation exposed offshore companies linked to more than 140 politicians in more than 50 countries—including 14 current or former world leaders, according to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). It also uncovered offshore hideaways tied to mega-banks, corporate bribery scandals, drug kingpins, Syria's air war on its own citizens and a network of people close to Russian President Vladimir Putin that shuffled as much as $2 billion around the world, ICIJ said.

"We found that the tools developed for the project were highly useful and usable, which motivated journalists to use the secure communication platforms provided by the ICIJ," said Susan McGregor, assistant professor at Columbia University and one of the principal investigators on this project who presented the work Wednesday at the USENIX security conference in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. She presented the group's paper, "When the Weakest Link is Strong: Secure Collaboration in the Case of the Panama Papers."

"This project is an example of the power of multi-disciplinary research," said Kelly Caine, director of the Humans and Technology Lab at Clemson and one of the principal investigators on the project. "We couldn't have made these important discoveries without the expertise of everyone on the team."

Provided by Clemson University

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